analysis PART 11

Stars Of The Silent Era!

When Dadasaheb Phalke scoured the bylanes of Bombay in search of actresses to play the lead role of Taramati in **Raja Harishchandra**, little did he realise that one day, not too far away into the future, girls would fall over each other to act in films. However, in the year 1912, Phalke discovered that even the 'ladies of the night' refused to act in films. Falling back on the great Indian tradition of getting young male actors to play the female lead, he chose a young restaurant cook, A. Salunke, to play the role of Taramati. Salunke would have a further claim to the record books when, in 1917, he would play both Rama and Seeta in **Lanka Dahan** – probably the only actor in the history of cinema to play both the male as well as female leads.

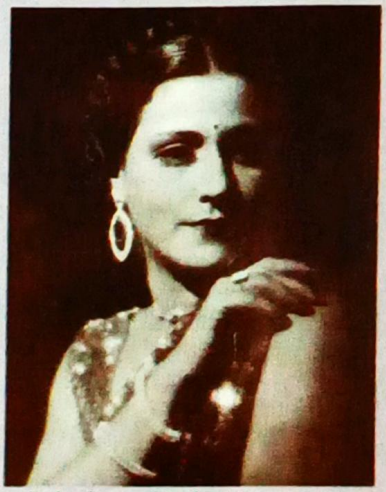
Records apart, the first girl to play the heroine in an Indian film was the Ahmedabad based Narmada Mande, who was chosen by S. N. Patankar for **Savitri**. The film had several technical flaws and could not be released. Though Mande made it in films much later, she missed her chance of being the first Indian girl to act in films. That pride of place went to Kamalabai Gokhale who played Mohini in Dadasaheb Phalke's **Mohini Bhasmasur** (1914). Incidentally Kamalabai, who passed away last year, is the mother of character actor Chandrakant Gokhale and grandmother of television star Vikram Gokhale.

Though artistes were billed in many of the early films, they were still far away from stardom. Early artistes like Salunke, Dabke, K. G. Gokhale, Gopal Ranade and the afore-mentioned Narmada Mande in Western India and Violet Berry, Doraiswamy Pillai and Subramanya Naidu in the South were hardly stars in the sense that the term has come to be applied today. In a sense, the first star of the Indian screen (because of the popularity she achieved) was Phalke's own daughter Mandakini, who played the child Krishna in **Kaliya Mardan** (1919). By and large, they were artistes and, more often than not, they also doubled up as assistants, both on and off the shooting floor.

The first stars began to emerge when the novelty of cinema gave way to the business of movie-making. This was some time between 1917 and 1919 soon after the stupendous success of **Lanka Dahan** (1917) when the first businessmen began to invest in the movies and the first big studios were set up. Producers realised that their products could be sold on the basis of their artistes – as was being done in Hollywood. Audiences were already flocking to see the films starring the Vitagraph Girl and the Biograph Girl, who were, after much fanfare, revealed to be Florence Turner and Florence Lawrence respectively.

One of the first stars to emerge on the Indian film scene was Sulochana who had made her debut as a stunt actress with **Veer Bala** (1925). She went on to become an accomplished actress under Mohan Bhavnani's direction at Kohinoor Film Company in **Cinema Queen** (1926) and **Telephone Girl** (1927). But it was only after she started working for the Imperial that she reached the truly heady heights of stardom. In fact, many of her silent hits like **Wildcat Of Bombay** (1927), **Indira B. A.** (1929), **Magic Flute** (1929) and **Madhuri** (1928) were later remade as talkie films and were equally successful. In **Wildcat of Bombay** she is said to have played eight roles, including that of a street urchin and an European blonde.

In spite of her name, Sulochana was actually an Anglo-Indian Jewess named Ruby Meyers who had been a telephone operator before she was



– Sulochana (Ruby Meyers).

discovered to act in films. Thanks to the stigma attached to working in films and, to a lesser extent, on stage, girls from respectable Indian families were not allowed to join the profession by their parents. Anglo-Indian girls, who were progressive in their outlook, were thus chosen to play the lead. The films being silent, they did not require the girls to display their poor Hindi/Urdu diction.

Thus there was a progression of Anglo-Indian girls who hid behind Indian names to make their way into the hearts of Indian audiences, namely Sita Devi (Renee Smith), Sabita Devi (Iris Gaspar), Madhuri (Beryl Claesen) and Manorama (Winnie Stewart). Of course, there were a few like Ermeline and Patience Cooper who did not take on an Indian name. Of course, by the mid-1920s the early success of these girls

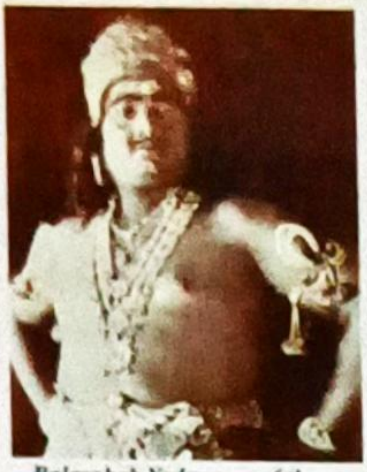
attracted Indian girls to the industry like Lalita Pawar (then known as Ambu), Bibbbo, Jilloo, Gohar and Fatma Begum's daughters, Sultana, Zubeida and Shehzadi. Fatma Begum was the wife of the Nawab of Sachin and had started out as an actress, later turning to production and direction – in fact, the first lady to do so.

Close on Sulochana's heels, in the hierarchy of stardom, was the doe-eyed Gohar (Mamajiwala). Often referred to as Glorious Gohar, she was the daughter of an actress and was already a star at Kohinoor when she met her future director and business partner Chandulal Shah. Just as Bhavnani and later Rama Shankar Choudhury moulded Sulochana for stardom, Chandulal Shah made Gohar a major star with films like **Bhaneli Bhamini** and **Gunsundari**. Her career came to bloom at Ranjit where she played roles which showed her in a favourable light.

– Gohar.

Mention must also be made of Patience Cooper, who was the first recognisable Indian star (having started in films in 1920) before Sulochana 'stole' her popularity and mantle. Based in Calcutta with the famed Madan Theatres, Patience Cooper made her debut as an actress with an Eurasian troupe. She then joined the Madans, first on the stage and then later in films, making her debut under Sisir Kumar Bhaduri's direction. She grew as an actress, at Madan, under directors like Priyanath Ganguly and Jyotish Banerjee. She had a Hollywoodian demeanour which made her very popular.

Strangely – or maybe not so strangely – enough, there were plenty of Indian leading men. Since many of the silent films were either mythologicals, historicals or based on legends, a majority of the leading men were **pehelwans** or bodybuilders, with limited histrionic talent. The better ones were Master Nandram, Gangaram, Maruti Rao, Ganpat Bakre, Zunzarrao Pawar and Balasaheb Yadav (the last two were to later become stunt coordinators during the early talkies). There were many others who survived well into the talkie era because they picked up the essence of histrionics. For instance, Master Vithal (the first actor to play a dual role in films), Jairaj, Nayampally, Prithviraj (who sired an entire dynasty), Mubarak. Stars like Jairaj, Prithviraj and Nayampally were destined to have longer and better careers in the talkie era.



– Balasaheb Yadav one of the 'pehelwan stars' in Painter's last film for Maharashtra Film Company, Lanka.

– Prithviraj Kapoor.

– Jairaj and Madhuri in Matrubhoomi (1932).

Among the ethnic heroes the name that stands head and shoulders above the others is that of Master Vithal who began his career with Baburao Painter's Maharashtra Film Company as an editor. Ironically, his first appearance was that of a dancing girl in **Kalyan Khajina** (1924) but he quickly covered ground and blossomed under Bhalji Pendharkar's direction to emerge as a major star. His 'soft' face and rugged physique made him irresistible to women and he became a major star for Sharda. He survived the silent era and starred in the first talkie, **Alam Ara**, opposite Zubeida, and continued making Marathi films well into the 1960s. He never lost his mass appeal and till the end was revered by the fraternity.

– Zubeida in an untitled film.

The more westernised among the leading men were Raja Sandow, and the Billimoria Brothers, Eddie and Dinshaw. Dinshaw was a major star (compared quite often to John Barrymore) and, with Sulochana, formed an enduring pair for the Imperial Film Company. The two starred in films like **Wildcat Of Bombay** and **Anarkali**, two of the biggest 'silent' hits. After his days of

stardom came to an end. Dinshaw turned sound recordist and worked within the industry. His brother Eddie Billimoria formed a star team with Madhuri and the two worked in several films.

With Hollywood cinema proving to be a role model for the Indian film industry it was but natural for the Indian stars to position themselves as derivatives of foreign favourites. Of course, in most cases the positioning was done by the studios so as to cash in on the popularity of both the role model and his/her imitation. Dinshaw Billimoria was billed as the Indian John Barrymore while the swashbuckling Master Vithal was called the Indian Douglas Fairbanks. And if Mary Pickford was America's sweetheart then Sulochana was her Indian counterpart.

By the mid-1920s stars were recognised as 'different beings' and hence, demanded and got a higher level of salary. The report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee (1927), headed by Dewan Bahadur T. Rangachariar, noted that while an average actor made around Rs. 200 to Rs. 250 per month, a star was given around Rs. 600 to Rs. 800 per month. Some of the better-loved stars even got Rs. 1000 a month while Sulochana created a record of sorts when she was given Rs. 5000 for Baburao Painter's **Baaz Bahadur** (1931) for just 35 days of work.

Stealing stars from studios was also a preoccupation of those times. Stars were enticed with higher salaries and a battle royale ensued. Many of these battles have now been forgotten but the one that has remained in the history books is the court case fought between the Sharda Film Company and the Imperial Film Company over Master Vithal (in October/November 1929) when he decided to leave Sharda much before his contract had expired. The famed Mohammed Ali Jinnah, then a solicitor of the top bracket but not yet a national leader, was hired by Imperial to fight Master Vithal's case. Imperial won.

Stars featuring in court cases – more often than not for dishonourable reasons – was not uncommon. The entire industry was in its Babylonian days and there were many who lived in the twilight zone of respectability.

Female stars then – as now – faced the greatest danger to their modesty. While some would suffer in silence, many others would not be cowed down. Exploitation was rampant and it was difficult to determine who was the victim and who was the victimised. Often the courts were called in to judge but, given the convoluted evidence presented, it is difficult to say, even from hindsight if justice was ever done.

'The Times of India' has, in its columns, recorded several such court cases where actresses have blamed their male colleagues for outraging their modesty. In June 1926 an actress named Gulab took cameraman Chaturbhai Patel and director Kanjibhai Rathod to court for having drugged her and taken her to 'the jungles of Thana' before bringing her back to her Lamington Road home. A year later in July 1927 another actress, Ermeline Cardoze (best known for her vampish roles), accused the same cameraman and director for having outraged her modesty while shooting in Matheran. Though the court refused to believe Ermeline's story and though Kanjibhai Rathod had the reputation of a good director, it is coincidental that he should be caught in two identical situations with two different actresses.

In a less shady case Sulochana was accused by a plantain merchant for having assaulted him with the help of her baker's servant, Karim. This case came up in February 1928 and the court found that Sulochana had unduly been dragged into the case. In another case which came up for hearing before the Senior Sub-Judge, Lahore, in March 1930 concerned the restitution of conjugal rights brought by George Nedou, heir of the famed Nedou's Hotel at Lahore, against actress Seeta Devi. It was alleged that Seeta Devi (Renee Smith) had converted to Islam before marrying Nedou. Another broken marriage which ended in court was that of Sultana who sued her husband Yakub Laljee, son of the ex-President of the Bombay Municipal Corporation, for maintenance. The court directed Laljee to pay an amount of Rs. 5 lakhs or a monthly alimony of Rs. 1700. It was the year 1931.

All these and other matters can be found documented in the newspapers and magazines of those days. With the film industry prospering into a moneymaking business, magazines began to grow around it, some to document the petty offences of the stars and others to document the growth of the industry. 'The Times of India' had begun to devote considerable space to films and their reviews. Other regional newspapers followed suit. A few like '**Dnyan Prakash**' and **Indu Prakash** (both in Marathi) devoted considerable front page space to Indian cinema. '**Kesari**' (Marathi), started by Lokmanya Tilak, published a series of articles written by Dadasaheb Phalke, detailing his pioneering travails as well as his comments on the art of film-making.

Magazines also began to publish film news, the first being the Gujarati weekly '**Mouj Majah**', which reserved a few pages for cinema. With the publication of **Cinema Samachar** (some time in the early 1920s) in Marathi, Gujarati and English began the era of specialised film magazines. Bhalji Pendharkar and Baburao Patel edited the Marathi and English versions of the magazine. A Gujarati magazine named **Chitrapat** was started a little later. Both these magazines had their offices on Lamington Road, very close to the present Naaz Cinema building.

In Calcutta a distributor named S. K. Vasagam started a magazine named '**Photoplay**', which covered the happenings in all the three film-producing centres. Returning to Madras he started another English magazine '**Movie Mirror**' in 1928. Since this was the only magazine of its kind, it had a great hand in shaping the silent film industry. The magazine lasted for three years, till the end of the silent era. On its closure Vasagam started '**The Amusement Weekly**' which continued well into the talkie era.

However, the full-fledged business of film gossip was still a little further. It was only in the talkie era that one-time 'silent' producer and director Baburao Patel launched his 'Film India', which would be the model for film journalism in the years to come. It is unfortunate that serious film writing never found a place in the business of the films but that is probably because the peccadilloes of stars were (and will always be) more attractive than the craft of the medium.

— SANJIT NARWEKAR g